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LET THEM LISTEN.

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THE ORAL READING OF LITERATURE DURING SCHOOL TIME IS DEFENDED. THE INCLUSION OF ORAL LITERATURE IS URGED AS A VITAL PART OF TEACHER PREPARATION AT ALL LEVELS. HELPING PUPILS LEARN TO DISCRIMINATE AND APPRECIATE ESTHETIC BEAUTY BY LISTENING MAKES THE ORAL READING OF LITERATURE WORTHY OF A PROMINENT PLACE IN THE SCHOOL PROGRAM. A CAREFULLY STRUCTURED PROGRAM OF ORAL PRESENTATION IN A BROAD, RICH ENVIRONMENT IS EDUCATIONALLY DEFENSIBLE. SOME GUIDELINES FOR PRODUCING AN ENVIRONMENT CONDUCIVE TO LISTENING ARE INCLUDED. THIS PAPER WAS PRESENTED AT THE INTERNATIONAL READING ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE (SEATTLE, MAY 4-6, 1967). (MC)

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Let Them Listen, VI The Literature Program (Elementary)

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Last week I had a visit from a recently graduated student of ours who is doing her first semester of teaching. This young lady was distressed to the point of seriously considering giving up teaching. She was having the expected first year problems with discipline and time allotment, but the reason for her visit to me was not because she lacked the skill to overcome these temporary setbacks, but because she was upset and confused by something that her principal had said to her. This beginning teacher was called into her principal's office to discuss some of her problems. The discussion began with the principal saying to the teacher, "I have been worried about you ever since I learned that you read to your class for twenty minutes every day. Don't you have any better way

to spend your time? Aren't there more important things you should be doing with your class?" The distraught young teacher explained that she had been taught (by me incidentally) that oral reading was a legitimate teaching procedure for second grade to which her principal replied, "Don't pay any attention to what they told you in college; most of those things don't work anyway. Certainly no good experienced teacher wastes twenty minutes a day reading to a class." Is this principal correct? Is it the lazy or poorly trained, the disinterested or uninformed teacher who reads to the class?

I would like to present to you a case in favor of allowing your children to listen to literature read to them in the classroom. After serious consideration I hope that you will agree with me and authorities in the field of education and children's literature who support oral reading and storytelling as a worthwhile procedure which is worthy of class time.

There are three kinds of teachers. Those we forget, those we forgive, and those we remember. If you will return with me to your early school career, perhaps you will remember as I do a teacher standing by her desk or comfortably seated reading another chapter from a much loved book. I can visualize several such teachers, and these are among the teachers that I remember. One could almost feel the air charged with class (and teacher) enthusiasm while the pupils silently begged for another chapter to be read - infringing upon the time meant for a geography lesson. Perhaps you remember the satisfaction of seeing the book in an important position on the desk and recall the

mixed emotions of sadness and anticipation when the book mark was almost to the end of Caddie Woodlawn.

If you are worth your salt you are now saying, "The aim of a good teacher is hardly just to be remembered. Furthermore, those were the good old days when the demands upon the teacher and student were not nearly so great." Both of these conclusions are, I think, accurate. However, maybe you are thinking, "If I have five minutes to spare before lunch, I sometimes read a poem, but as a general rule I can't waste that much time." It is the implication of those last statements that I hope to disprove. The statements imply that reading to a room full of children is an extra frill only to be undertaken by the terribly well organized teacher who is able to get really important work done in less than the allotted time, or the lazy and indulgent who waste away precious teaching hours with trivia. Perhaps you are saying, "When my class is good I read to them," or "If they are particularly quiet they get a story on Friday afternoon," or "Everyone who has finished his day's work can listen to a story record." These thoughts suggest that reading literature to our children is a reward for good behavior, a prize for academic achievement, or a "blue-ribbon-in-sound."

Either of these implications - first that reading is a frill, an extra for left-over time, or second that reading is a reward for good behavior or academic achievement - is easily sensed by the children. If the teacher has the impression that oral reading is not really very important then the child's reaction is "Why should I listen?

Literature isn't really very important." This is very logical reasoning on the student's part. It is very possible that the child's negative reaction to listening to literature will lead him to the conclusion that reading is not very important either. We know that the reverse is true - the child who is read to tends to read more. Could we not assume that the child who is not read to and is taught that being read to is unimportant tends to read less?

Many of our students have experienced precious little oral reading. Even fewer have listened to really great literature, and probably none have heard drama read. If they are to hear literature, then, they must hear it from you. If they are to experience the benefits of listening to great literature, they will experience them because you thought oral reading important.

Why Should I Read to My Class?

What is to be gained from reading to a class? There are at least four reasons, any one of which is justification for the regular inclusion of oral reading in the classroom.

First, there is enjoyment. If your students learn that literature is a source of pleasure and happiness, this knowledge will carry over to their adult life. The sheer pleasure derived from listening to a story or a poem read by a teacher who obviously thoroughly enjoyed it is justification enough to read to our pupils Laura E. Richards' "Eletelephony," Mr. Popper's Penguins, Rain Makes Apple Sauce -- it is difficult to know where to stop when listing literature that is "long" on enjoyment.

Second, there are valuable ethical lessons to be gained from the literature that is available today - not the superficial moralism in the McGuffy readers or even the pointed morals in Aesop's Fables, but the better understanding gained about ourselves and others which is internalized from the literature teachers share with students. Frank Bonham's Durango Street, recently awarded a "Recognition of Merit" by the Claremont Reading Conference, is a realistic book on teenage gangs which would be most appropriate for oral reading to an older group. The old familiar All American or Thee, Hannah! speak out on current minority group problems in a way that can be felt by the listener. There are almost limitless selections in the category of self understanding and human relationships. A number of suggested lists are available in this field.

A third value is the acquisition of academic learning. There are gains to be made in language arts and in all academic areas through oral presentations of literature. Our language is actually an oral one. Students who have never had the opportunity to listen to the spoken language are less likely to develop an ear for its beauty. In the English Journal, January, 1966, Edmund Farrell stresses that the act of reading literature is the act of silently speaking the printed page. "Such a subtle concept as tone in writing could never be taught unless one were first trained to hear and discriminate among the sounds of the written language." We know that gains made in any area of the language arts reflects as improvement in all of the language areas. Marjorie Smiley in the April, 1965, English Journal

stressed the particularly great problem the underprivileged child faces in learning to read. She refers to the research showing a high relationship between reading and auding and concludes that we do not do nearly enough reading aloud to our elementary and secondary students or make enough use of the rich store of records of poetry, stories, speeches and plays. However, not only will the child benefit in reading and related language ability, but there are gains to be made in all academic areas through selections read aloud. A study of World War I is given depth by the reading of Gay-Neck. Nine Days to Christmas is perfect with a unit on Mexico. Eskimo Boy, a strong children's novel, will give your class an understanding of Alaska that an organization of facts about the North can not touch. By reading these books to your children you keep an "eye check" on them for understanding so that an explanation can follow confused looks. This you cannot do if the book has been assigned for silent reading.

A fourth reason for reading to your children, and perhaps the most important one, is the aesthetic growth gained by losing one's self in the excitement of prose, the beauty of poetry, the fascination of drama. The enthralling escape provided in Treasure Island, the creative greatness of characterization found in Rabbit Hill, and the quiet beauty of words in Siddy Jo Johnson's new book of poetry Feather In My Hand is invaluable in this day when we are bombarded with the mediocre and even the shoddy. Many individuals will never have the motivation or the ability to taste really great literature.

This last value, helping children learn to discriminate and appreciate aesthetic beauty by listening, makes oral reading worth a prominent place in the hierarchy of important subjects which are deserving of school time. For any or all of these four reasons, the reading of literature to your students is educationally defensible.

How Can I Help My Students to Listen Appreciatively?

How can you as a teacher prepare your students for appreciatively listening to literature? There are at least four responsibilities that you must accept.

Your first responsibility is that of setting the stage for listening and then following through after the selection is shared. There will be times, of course, when the preparation is already there and all you need to do is to be familiar with the proper selection. For example, the first snow of the year would provide ample preparation for The Snowy Day or the beautiful "Velvet Shoes." When a first grader loses a tooth, One Morning in Maine is eagerly accepted to assure your six year old that he is not falling apart. There are so many poems that are appropriate for spontaneous use in the class -- to save a member embarrassment or overcome a tense situation. For the most part, however, you will have to do a bit of teaching to help your children to learn to listen with appreciation to literature. A carefully structured lesson will add immeasurably to the preparation of oral reading. At Southern Methodist University students enrolled in children's literature go into the schools to tell stories. We have found that the introduction and conclusion of the story is the most

difficult part of their story telling. Students who work hard preparing their presentation on tape and reworking their selection for just the right dramatic quality find that the story falls flat if they try to begin with just "Once upon a time . . ." The addition of a few minutes of class preparation to set the stage for listening is most beneficial. This measure may be a simple "Have you ever had a rabbit?" or "What would it be like to have a bear for a pet?" The preparation might be very elaborate - a puppet show, a bulletin board, or a field trip. Sometimes even the shock treatment is effective. Edmund Farrell discusses the time that he purposely enraged a slow class to get them interested in a story. He passed out small pieces of paper, had each pupil write his name on it, and place it in a hopper. By this time the class was mildly interested. "Almost all of you did very well on the last examination," Mr. Farrell explained, "but since it is my policy to fail at least a few students and since I want to be fair, I thought the best procedure would be to draw out the names of those students who would not pass." The students, needless to say, broke into a mild riot. (They questioned not only his sanity but those on the back row even questioned his parentage, he states.) He calmed them by saying that he would reconsider his policy, but first he wanted to read a selection to them. He followed by reading Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" to a most receptive and interested group.

The "follow up" after the selection has been read is important in helping your children learn to listen appreciatively. The technique

used to tie the package together will be unique for each art from and, indeed, for each selection. For example, after hearing and enjoying a poem, the class might discuss what they "saw" as they listened to the poem; what words did the poet use to suggest color, sound, or mood. You would not want to analyze every poem, but this would be one approach to facilitate listening. I have some delightful papers a student teacher in the fifth grade shared with me. Her children closed their eyes to see the scene painted by Robert Frost's "Stopping By Woods On A Snowy Evening." They are delightful. One youngster described the scene as he saw it -- the horse with the questioning expression and then ended with a personal comment: "That Mr. Robert Frost, he writes good." Your first responsibility toward helping your class listen is to get their attention and extend their after-listening interest by bridging the gap between their own experiences and the new experiences that they will encounter while hearing the selection.

The second responsibility of the teacher who uses oral reading effectively is the ability to read the selection well. To be most effective, you will need to read the selection aloud before presenting it to your class. Of course, it is obvious that you must know the subject matter of your selection. A librarian friend of mine remembers with horror the mistake that she made of orally reading <u>It's Like This Cat</u> to a group without first reading it herself. It had just been announced as the Newbery Award winner and she was anxious to share the new book with her story telling group. All went well up to the point where the book presents the extremely

realistic picture of male cats that wander about at night. She tried to paraphrase and omit some of the terms, phrases and then sentences until she was hopelessly lost. However, by "reading the selection well," I refer to the oral presentation. I have found that many books and poems that I have read to myself for years and felt quite confident about contain words that I mispronounce in oral reading. This, too, can be very embarrassing when you are reading before a class. Be sure then, that you have read the selection to be acquainted with the subject matter and that you have orally practiced for pronunciation and enunciation. Practice for dramatic quality -- the pause at just the right place -- the intonation. Be comfortable with your poem so that it is not a sing-song but real music in words. In short, be able to read or tell your selection well if you want your children to listen appreciatively.

Your third responsibility is to provide an environment that is as conducive to listening as possible. The following guidelines will help produce such a climate. (1) Try to eliminate as many interruptions as you can. If your audience will be young children, be sure that everyone has had the opportunity to go to the restroom and get a drink. (2) Anticipate words or ideas that will need clarification and explain unfamiliar concepts before reading or telling your story. (3) Have clutter and distractions out of the way. A particularly interesting pin or dangling earrings tend to side track your listeners. (4) Get the children near you if this is feasible. I like to sit on the floor with my children around me when I am telling a story to the very young and I sit on a low chair with older ones. There is a real

psychological advantage to being at eye level instead of towering over a class of boys and girls. (5) If it is a picture book you are sharing with your class, use an opaque projector if you can do so without causing distractions or learn to hold the book so that all may see. At least assure the back row that they will be the first to get the book after you have finished. (6) Explain to the children that they should remember any questions or comments that they have for discussion after the story is finished. Train your children not to interrupt. They will accept this as being to their advantage when they realize that a story or poem is much more enjoyable if it is completed. (7) Obviously the room enviornment should be comfortable. Excessive heat, cold, glare, outside noise are all distracting. These distractions, of course, cannot always be eliminated, but at least be aware of the importance of the enviornment in which you tell your story.

If we are to teach our children to listen to creative work, the fourth responsibility is to use variety. There must be variety in the types of literature that you share with the children -- prose, poetry, and drama. Variety must be provided in the range of both classical and contemporary literature that you present -- picture stories, folk tales, fiction, biography, fantasy, and factual selections. Variety also involves the use of different techniques to bring to life the best in literature. For example: (1) teach the children how to read and tell stories to a group. (2) Use the best recordings which are available separately or in connection with filmstrips. (Robert Frost's reading of his own poems for example) (3) Use television,

tapes, and films (Weston Woods, Time of Wonder and other Caldecott films and filmstrips are excellent.) (4) Provide a listening corner in your room or library where children may listen independently to recordings. (5) Make creative use of such aids as chalk talks, flannel boards, bulletin displays, and puppets for the presentation of specific literature. Use variety in the selections you share with your class and variety in the methods you employ to enjoy literature.

To conclude, then, I would contend that the inclusion of oral literature is a responsibility of the good teacher, not an extra, a frill, a reward or an excuse for teacher preparation, but a vital part of the elementary, secondary, and college program. One has only to look in almost any issue of the Reading Teacher for support of this view. In January of this year, Mark Taylor said "Concerned as we are with teaching children to read, we must take thought as to why they should read . . . A teacher who does not read on her own and who does not share the best in books with children is living a lie every time she teaches reading." You as a teacher should give students the opportunity to listen appreciatively for enjoyment, ethical values, academic learning, and aesthetic growth. You should structure carefully a program of oral presentation and furnish students with a broad, rich backgound in an enviornment which is conducive to listening. You should seek variety in the literature and in the methods of presentation. If you provide these priceless listening advantages for your students, you will be a teacher who is remembered

rather than forgotten or forgiven, but much more important, your students will carry to adulthood experiences worth remembering and continuing.

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